

Monday, December 19th, 2016

Blairhoyle

For Charlotte, there was a rude surprise awaiting her when she arrived home.

"You've moved out!" she exclaimed. "You're taking *him* and leaving *me*?" she demanded, indicating Jake. "But, I was here first!"

Cassie could see the hurt expression, but Charlotte was only getting warmed up.

"Were you not even going to say goodbye? When I found Jake gone, I feared the worst and . . . fuck!"

"That'll be a pound for swearing and another pound because you are thirteen and should know better," Alexandra commented.

"Okay, I'm sorry!" Charlotte growled with little sincerity in her tone. "I just thought that. . ."

"You're staying here at Blairhoyle, Charlotte," Cassie said. "This has all been thought through and well, as Kaitlin pointed out so eloquently, Jake has a dick."

"You wanted a boy?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I can see why," Charlotte reasoned. "Will I still see you all?"

"Of course, honey," Cassie replied. "You are welcome to come over, anytime. We even have a spare bedroom."

"Thanks."

"Did you have a fun weekend, Charlotte?" Richard asked having kept well out of the argument.

"Yes, sir - it was exhausting, but it got the point across."

"Glad to hear it."

East Mayfield

Harper and Diana were sitting in the living room reading.

Keira had insisted that as neither would be ready to start school before January, that they should both read for at least two hours every day. Keira would also set them both tasks and tests to keep them occupied and their minds functioning. Harper was generally okay with learning - she enjoyed it - but there were some days that she just wanted to rest and being forced to stick her nose in a book chosen by her big sister was not always appealing. As for Diana, she was a swot - the girl *loved* to read and do logic puzzles. Harper grudgingly admitted that while Diana had to be the most annoying human being on the planet, she was very clever, and her brain worked just as fast as Harper's. Diana could do mental arithmetic in her head much quicker than Harper could which irked the younger girl to a point. Harper actually found herself asking Diana for help with some of her tasks which Keira had provided - mainly maths and spelling.

Keira was pleased to see the two girls getting on so well. Both had very different backgrounds but had somehow come together in the hospital and, although Harper would *never* admit it publicly, they both needed one another. After a chat with Cassie on the phone, earlier, Keira realised that Harper was

needed by someone else and, therefore, a plan had been hatched for that very evening. But before that. . .

There came a knock on the door and Keira grinned happily.

"Anybody going to answer the door?" she asked.

"No, we're fine," Harper commented, barely raising her eyes from the book she was reading.

There was no response from Diana who was hidden behind a large book of Sudoku puzzles. Keira chuckled as she got out of her chair - she knew who was at the door, and while she was excited, the girls knew nothing. Several minutes later, Keira returned to the living room with the visitor. Both girls looked up, then back down at their books before doing a classic doubletake.

"Blake!" both girls exclaimed, and the poor man almost jumped out of his skin.

"I think they're happy to see you," Keira deadpanned as the man was mobbed by the two girls.

Lasswade Road

Harper and Diana were not the only ones to be welcoming somebody home.

Jeremy Lai and Ewan Campbell were just walking back from the bus stop and chatting happily when Jeremy paused - his Dad was back as evidenced by the car on the drive. His Dad had left very early that morning before he and Ewan had left for school, but he had not explained where he was going, despite Jeremy's demands for information. As he entered the house, Jeremy froze, causing Ewan to walk into the back of him. The twelve-year-old sniffed the air - jasmine. He had not smelt the scent in five months - not since his mother had been hospitalised. Then the boy tentatively stepped into the living room, followed by Ewan.

Ewan was very surprised to see Jeremy drop his school bag and then burst into tears without any warning as a female voice, which Ewan did not recognise, called out.

"Hello, Jeremy. How's my boy?"

That evening

Vengeance Command Centre Ashley House, Edinburgh

"What's going on?" Diana asked as they drove down back country roads in the darkness.

"I could ask the same," Blake commented.

"Just a little surprise," Keira commented.

"I'm saying nothing," Harper added, struggling to hide her grin.

Keira pulled turned down a long driveway and she eventually pulled up outside what looked like a large manor house. There were several vehicles already parked outside. Harper and Keira led Diana and Blake up the stone steps to the main door which was opened from the inside. Natasha smiled happily as she waved the four of them inside.

"Hi, Natasha," Keira said with a grin.

"Hello, guys," Natasha replied. "Please take a seat in the Orangery ready for our briefing."

The four of them, plus Natasha, passed through the drawing room and stepped into the large glazed area known as the Orangery. One person was already seated.

"Scarlett is a little concerned as I won't tell her what is going on," Natasha commented.

"Hello, Scarlett," Harper said a little stiffly as she took a seat in a chair opposite Scarlett.

"Hello, Harper - you're looking good," Scarlett said.

"Hi, Scarlett," Diana said as she sat down next to the older girl as indicated by Keira.

Keira sat down beside her sister as Natasha closed the door. She opened up a recessed panel in the wall and she pressed a few buttons. Diana watched wide-eyed as every pane of glass turned opaque. Natasha then came to sit down, beside Keira. Blake sat next to Scarlett.

"Welcome to Ashley House," Natasha began. "You three are about to be let in on one of our nation's most closely guarded secrets. Blake, Scarlett, Diana: welcome to the *Vengeance* Command Centre.

All three were silent as they listened.

"Scarlett is already aware of who and what Harper is, as is Blake. Diana figured things out, but not everything. Tonight, all will be explained to the three of you. Commander, you are already very much aware of the security implications involved, yes?" Blake nodded. "Scarlett, I understand that you had an up close and personal meeting with Stephanie Walker, as well as with Harper." Scarlett cringed but she nodded. "Diana, you have also received a mini-lecture from Harper, yes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"It is imperative that operational security is maintained, do you all understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Any questions?"

"Are we to become vigilantes?" Diana asked excitedly.

"That is purely voluntary, Diana," Keira replied. "However, it is important that you both know how to protect yourselves considering that you will be spending time with those that are vigilantes. As you know, *Vengeance* has just survived betrayal and outright attack - Harper is an example of that." Scarlett slid down in her chair. "We are under constant scrutiny and we could have to protect ourselves at any moment. Diana, Scarlett - you will both be assessed to see what you can do and where we think that you might be able to benefit *Vengeance*. That will take a lot of work and it is a two-way street, so if either one of you does not want this, then say so."

"Thanks," Diana replied.

"Okay - time to show you guys around the place."

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Natasha led the way as they passed back through the drawing room and then through the reception hall.

"Dining room on the left. Kitchen straight ahead, up those steps. That door on the right leads to the office that me and my brother share."

Natasha then punched an eight-digit code into a keypad set into the wall beside a stout-looking wooden door. With a dull buzz, the door was released. Natasha directed the three visitors inside and pointed them down a staircase which was floodlit with LED illumination. At the bottom of the staircase, Keira stopped the group as Natasha followed behind.

"We have various spaces, down here, including an armoury, some equipment storage, and . . . our control room."

Keira looked over at Diana and laughed.

"Do you need to wee, Diana, or are you just over-excited?" Keira asked.

"Oh, God!" Scarlett breathed as she folded her arms irritably.

"Excited!" Diana exclaimed excitedly.

From the base of the staircase, Natasha turned right and walked towards a very stout door lined with steel. Beside the door, embedded in the wall, there was a keypad. Another eight digits later, and the door clicked before opening inwards automatically.

"Welcome," Natasha said with a flourish, "to the *Vengeance* Control Room!"

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Diana's eyes were almost popping out of the youngster's head.

She took in the giant flat screens on the wall, the command consoles with additional screens embedded in them. Diana pushed past Natasha and she gazed at all the displays, buttons, and readouts. Her right hand reached out towards one of the screens on the master command console, but she froze as a voice called out to her.

"Don't touch that, Aegea!"

Eric strode out of an adjacent room and he put himself between Diana and his master command console.

"What did you call me?" Diana asked curiously.

"Your codename, Diana: Aegea was the queen on the Amazons, in Greek Mythology," Eric explained. "I'm Eric, by the way, and I run all the technical equipment for *Vengeance*."

Scarlett made a derogatory noise.

"If she is 'Aegea' - do I have a silly name, too."

"Scarlett!" Natasha growled. "If you do not want to be involved, then you can leave, right now."

Scarlett realised that she was about to be booted out, and that was *not* what she wanted. She needed what *Vengeance* could offer, to help her put her past behind her.

"I'm sorry - I didn't mean that."

"Okay," Natasha replied. "For you, we have selected Pyrrha."

"What does that mean?" Scarlett asked.

"It means: 'the colour of fire'," Natasha replied.

"Okay," Scarlett replied.

"Cool!" Diana added.

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After the tour, the two girls were led back up the stairs and then up to the kitchen, where the two girls found several other girls waiting for them.

"Girls, this is Scarlett Radford, and this is Diana Price. Some of you may know one or either of them," Keira said in introduction. "Scarlett, Diana - please meet: Naomi Perrin, Kaitlin Perrin, Harper Sharp, Olivia Kensington, Jessica, Kensington, and Electra Haig. You eight girls are going to enjoy a sleepover. I know that there will be animosity between some of you, but I am hoping that you can all find some common ground. Harper is in charge. Scarlett, Diana - you will use tonight to ask questions and decide if you really want to be a part of Vengeance. Nobody will think less of either one of you should you decide you want no part of it."

"Okay," Natasha said. "I want you each to go upstairs and get into your pyjamas, please, then I will bring up some pizza."

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Scarlett and Diana looked a little worried - Scarlett could think of a half-dozen reasons off the top of her head why she might not survive the night, and Diana could see Harper smirking, which was *not* an encouraging sign.

It took a good forty minutes for all eight girls to change into their pyjamas and settle down in one of the larger bedrooms from which all the beds had been removed and half a dozen mattresses had been laid out on the floor with a large pile of duvets and pillows. Diana noticed a distinct arrangement of where people were sitting when she entered the bedroom after having got changed in the bathroom. Scarlett was seated on a mattress over to the left side of the bedroom. She was facing five angry-looking girls gathered over to the right side of the room. Diana made a point of going to sit beside Scarlett which just gained Diana the same angry looks. Then Harper entered the room - ouch!

Diana had seen Harper showing mock anger, and even some annoyance at times, but damn if the nine-year-old did not go nuclear.

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Harper glared at the five girls gathered together in a group and she flexed her one good hand.

Harper made for Naomi who was glaring at Scarlett - Harper slapped her across the face and then she hauled the girl to her feet . . . apparently, Harper was getting her strength back, the girls thought. Kaitlin was next, followed by Electra, but Olivia and Jessica wisely jumped to their feet and they swiftly went to sit with Diana and Scarlett. Harper faced the three *Predators* and her eyes dared anybody to move.

"Look," Scarlett began as she stood up. "I'll go. . ."

"Fucking sit down, Scarlett!" Harper bellowed before turning back to her friends. "You three can remain standing."

Naomi, Kaitlin, and Electra were not backing down, and they stood their ground, glaring back at Harper . . . but they did remain standing.

"So, you three aren't happy with Scarlett Radford being in the same room as you perfect bitches. Okay, Scarlett made my life a living hell - but as I recall, so did somebody else: Naomi! You took immense joy in causing me pain. You took immense joy in making my life miserable as hell. Admittedly, I often did the same in return, but that was life for us, right?"

Naomi mumbled something as she looked down at the floor.

"What is it that you three bitches want of me?" Harper demanded. "Do you want me to strip the bitch and humiliate her, just like she did me? Is that it? Well, I won't! You know nothing about what went on between me and her. You are just basing this crap on your own flawed intuition. As I have already said, I do not need any of you fuckers to protect me. Just think yourselves damn lucky that I still can't kick you, or punch you with my left hand, or I would make each one of you really suffer. As for you, Electra," Harper prodded the girl hard in the chest, "I understand that the person who gave you your scars is a good friend of yours, and Stephanie's too, despite that girl trying to kill you both - and almost succeeding with you, if it weren't for a very convenient roll of fucking duct tape! Naomi - I honestly thought better of you, but I obviously misjudged you. Kaitlin's just a baby, so she knows fucking nothing."

"Hey!" Kaitlin exclaimed.

"Shut the fuck up before I slap you stupid, Kaitlin!" Harper declared. "What none of you know - what none of you could ever know - is that without one person, I would be dead right now. Soon after the failed rescue - I don't want fucking apologies, so shut the fuck up - I found myself thrown into a cellar which was to be my prison for a further fifteen days. After a day or two, I began to give up on life, losing the will to live. I gave up drinking. I gave up eating. Only, there was one person who insisted on forcing water down me and feeding me soup. That person cleaned up my piss, and she cleaned up my shit. She talked to me continuously. That voice was the only thing that kept me going. I resented that person, bitterly - I really did - but some part of me clung to life. I had no energy left to fight her off as she forced me to eat and drink. She did her best to clean me and keep me safe. I owe her everything, as without her, I would never have seen my sister or my friends again. Without Scarlett Radford, I would be dead."

Scarlett felt all eyes turn on her and she cringed at the decidedly unwanted attention.

"Scarlett is not so very much different from us, guys. I know you won't believe it, but she was forced to do things against her will, just as we were. It was her father who tortured me. It was her father who forced her to hurt me. We have all forgiven one another for some pretty heinous acts - why the fuck should Scarlett be any different? Scarlett, stand up, please . . . and remove your . . . err hand."

Scarlett did so, making a couple of sharp movements with her left hand and she deftly removed her prosthetic limb. There were gasps from the everyone other than Harper and Diana who had both seen it before. Scarlett held up her stump.

"Scarlett has a life-long reminder of what she and her father did. She is being punished for what her father started . . . he is dead - he abandoned his daughter who now has to live out her life with a constant reminder of him and his traitorous activities. Thank you, Scarlett - I really mean that."

Scarlett nodded as she stepped back, and she reattached her prosthetic hand.

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Harper took a moment to gather her thoughts as she faced down the three girls who were cringing slightly - none of them had enjoyed the sight of Scarlett's stump.

"I am going to say this just once - SO FUCKING LISTEN! Scarlett is under *my* protection - anybody lays a finger on her, they answer to me - UNDERSTAND? Maybe, when I have healed, I might kick the living daylights out of her, but by then, I hope that she will be able to fight back. Now, Scarlett, this is Kaitlin Perrin."

Kaitlin looked a little concerned as she stood face to face with Scarlett again. It was not like at the house at the weekend - that was different.

"Kaitlin is also known as Glide - she is the vigilante that you fought. I was able to watch the CCTV recorded in Wales and I know that you did not want to fight. But they all believed me dead - thanks to your father's fake video - and they wanted revenge. I watched Glide as she goaded you and she kicked you over the bannister and down the stairs."

"That hurt," Scarlett admitted with a grimace as her mind drifted back to the end of October that year.

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She had been distracted by her father's betrayal as he had run to save his own hide, abandoning her to the vengeful vigilantes.

Scarlett had totally lost awareness of the situation around her and the fight with Glide. She had not seen the short vigilante approach her, seemingly finished with her torture. Scarlett had only seen the cutlass glinting as it had swept horizontally towards her right wrist - it had moved in slow motion and seemed to take forever to bite into her exposed wrist. Then had come the explosion of pain, worse than any pain which she had ever felt in her entire thirteen years of life. Her nervous system almost collapsed as her body went into shock at the violent assault on her limb. She could still see her hand, the fingers tightly gripping the hilt of the cutlass, as it had fallen to the ground. She had sunk the ground, first to her knees, and then onto her bottom as her body shook violently and she struggled to comprehend the blood pumping steadily from her shattered wrist and the severed limb lying just a foot away from her. Then had come the explosion of noise as she heard screaming - her own screaming as the terror and pain had truly taken hold. Then a hand had grasped her by the mouth, stopping her screaming. She had heard the electronically enhanced voice of her vigilante adversary as she had growled into her ear.

"I am not going to kill you - that would be too good for you, bitch. Every time you look at where your hand was, each time you go to wipe your fucking twat, you will remember Harper."

Scarlett had tried to respond but sound and sight had begun to fade as her vision went tunnel-like and she had felt strong hands easing her to the ground. She had woken again to find herself being shaken around - her tortured mind told her she was in a helicopter just moments before she had lost consciousness. Again, she had awoken. The ceiling above her was grey-painted steel and brightly lit. She had no idea where she was . . . or why. She felt no pain. She felt nothing. Then she drifted off into nothing. Several times she had awoken from drug-induced sleep before slipping back into a dark realm where she found only her darkest fears. The nightmares had been, and still were, so lifelike and so filled with horrible things.

Scarlett snapped back to reality as Harper nudged her.

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"It was Glide who took your hand, Scarlett."

Kaitlin noticed Scarlett's titanium and carbon-fibre hand flex into a ball and reopen as Scarlett's face went very dark with anger. Kaitlin expected to be struck by the hand and she winced as she turned her head to her right, and away from the hand. A hand did strike her face, only it was on her right cheek and it was from Scarlett's real left hand. The smack of flesh against flesh had cut through the air like a knife and there were several audible gasps. Kaitlin's hands went to her right cheek, holding it tightly as tears filled her eyes. Nobody spoke until the door to the bedroom opened and Keira entered.

"We having fun, are we?" she asked.

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Keira could see straight away that there was trouble - actually, she had heard her sister's dulcet tones all the way down the stairs in the kitchen!

"What have I told you about using your indoors voice, Harper," Keira chuckled as she ruffled her sister's hair - something Keira knew that Harper hated.

"Keira!" Harper growled as Diana giggled.

"You look so sweet when you're angry," Keira said in a tone like you might use with a very young child.

Harper's cheeks were turning very pink as her big sister embarrassed her. Then as Harper focussed on her sister, and away from her friends, she realised how weak she was feeling, and she mentally thanked her sister for butting in as she sat down heavily beside Diana who looked a little worried. Keira turned to look at the three miscreant *Predators*.

"Wow!" Keira chuckled. "Talk about three sorry bitches!"

The three girls in question looked embarrassed as Keira looked them over. Keira seized hold of Kaitlin's jaw and gently moved the eight-year-old's head from side to side.

"That'll look good in the morning!" Keira exclaimed. "Who was it?"

Scarlett raised her hand, somewhat timidly.

"Good one, Scarlett! You have a nice left hook there."

Scarlett blushed scarlet.

"What!" Kaitlin exclaimed loudly. "Is that all you've got to say?"

"Kaitlin, dear, you took her hand and in response, she simply slapped you - hard, I will admit - so I think you've got off rather lightly, don't you think?"

Kaitlin groaned as she sat down on a mattress, dragging Scarlett down with her. Keira then turned to the remaining pair of girls and she examined their slapped left cheeks.

"Were these you, Harper? Pussy slaps if you ask me."

"I just wanted to get my point across and I didn't want to hurt them," Harper admitted as she leaned into Diana who put an arm around the younger girl's shoulders.

"Okay," a new voice said as Natasha entered the room with an impressive pile of pizza boxes. "Now that Harper has that out of her system, you can all eat."

There was general laughter as everybody standing sat down and began to pull open the pizza boxes as Natasha passed them out. Keira vanished for a few minutes before returning with cans of Coke and two large rolls of paper towel.

"Oh yes," Keira commented. "Cassie wanted me to pass on a message, or two. Please remind Kaitlin to eat like a human being and not like a deranged animal."

There was laughter from everybody present - except for Kaitlin who simply scowled.

"And please tell remind Naomi to wash her hands after they've been down her knickers," Keira finished.

Naomi's eyes went wide as everybody laughed again.

"It was just the one time - I had an itch!" the nine-year-old mumbled.

The ice was well and truly broken as all eight girls began chatting and stuffing their faces with pizza. How they managed to talk and eat at the same time seemed impossible, but they managed it.

"Scarlett, can we see your hand again?" Kaitlin asked bravely.

Scarlett rolled her eyes as she raised up her right hand and moved the articulated fingers around.

"Awesome!" Electra exclaimed as she moved closer to examine the limb.

"You gotta see Diana's legs - they are almost as awesome," Harper pointed out.

Diana grimaced as she pulled up the legs of her pyjamas.

Apart from Harper, who was very familiar with the legs, everybody was astounded by them. Diana suddenly found herself the centre of attention as her legs were checked out in detail by the girls, slices of pizza completely forgotten about. Harper grinned as both Diana and Scarlett were mobbed - all the nastiness of just forty minutes before was long gone. Even Scarlett's animosity for Kaitlin was gone as the two girls giggled together.

Keira was right, Kaitlin would have a damn nice bruise come the morning.

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Keira and Natasha were downstairs in the kitchen.

Eric was spending the night as he had computer updates to sort out down in his data core.

"I'll see you two girls in the morning," Eric said as he headed outside and towards the garden.

"Night, Eric!" the girls called out.

The friends had been concerned that there might be friction between the *Predators* and the non-*Predators*. They had not been wrong, but Keira was very proud of Harper for taking charge and not being afraid to put her friends in their place. It had been a calculated risk, but it had been successful. Considering that it was approaching eleven o'clock, Keira headed up the stairs to make sure that the girls were thinking about sleep. She was a little concerned by the relative quiet compared to Harper's bellowing of a few hours earlier. Keira pushed open the bedroom door and she grinned at the sight. Harper was fast asleep beside Diana who was also fast asleep, her legs standing neatly beside the door. Kaitlin lay with Naomi and Electra while Jessica lay on

her own next to her big sister who was still awake, as was Scarlett. The two thirteen-year-old girls were talking quietly and giggling together.

"You two, okay?" Keira asked.

"Yes, thanks," Olivia replied.

"Yes, thank you," Scarlett added with a grin.

"Get some sleep, please, girls. Sleep tight."

The following morning

Tuesday, December 20th

Blairhoyle

Alexandra snapped awake to screaming.

She ran towards the sound, knowing that it could only be Charlotte. As she pushed open the bedroom door, she grimaced. It was a familiar sight for the mother of two grown-up girls. Charlotte was sitting up in bed, her duvet thrown back and the girl was crying her heart out. The reason for the crying and screaming was a spreading patch of red on the pink bottom sheet and the same stain on her pink pyjama bottoms. Alexandra knew that it was the youngster's first period and no worse than the two firsts she herself had endured as Sarah and Cassie had grown up. Alexandra sat down beside the traumatised twelve-year-old and she put an arm around her shoulder.

"I'm being stupid," Charlotte said. "I know what it is - I think."

"The first of many, many more, Charlotte."

"It was just scary . . . and painful."

"Come on, sweetie; shower for you."

Alexandra helped Charlotte off the bed and she led the girl into the bathroom where Alexandra turned on the shower while Charlotte gingerly pulled off her blood-sodden pyjamas. Alexandra left the girl to her shower, but after a brief trip to her own bedroom, she quickly changed Charlotte's equally blood-sodden bedding before sitting down to wait for the youngster.

Charlotte reappeared after twenty minutes, looking miserable.

"Get yourself dried off, sweetie, and get dressed. You'll need one of these."

Alexandra placed a small, plastic-wrapped object onto the bed. Charlotte's face went bright red as she figured out what it was.

"Don't be embarrassed, sweetie; you are not the first young girl in this house to endure her first period. You'll be fine, and I'll help you along, every step of the way."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise. Come downstairs and I'll make you some breakfast."

Charlotte smiled as Alexandra left her in peace. It had been something she had dreaded. She had seen other girls go through it, and it had looked horrible. She knew that it was all a part of her growing into a woman, but it was still horrible. She quickly dried off and dressed, inserting the pad into her knickers which felt a little strange, at first.

The girl took a deep breath and she headed downstairs to the kitchen.

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Breakfast was waiting for her - a full cooked breakfast.

Richard peered over at the girl as she entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, Charlotte."

"Good morning, Captain."

"I heard you had a bloody night."

Charlotte's mouth dropped open and her face got very hot.

"Have no fear, Charlotte, I've seen it all before. I hope your first isn't as bad as Cassie's - what a bloody week that was!"

"Ignore him, Charlotte - he's just a bigoted old man!" Alexandra chuckled.

Charlotte smiled as she sat down to eat her breakfast - she loved Alexandra's cooking.

"Thank you . . . for looking after me," Charlotte offered meekly.

"It's not a problem, Charlotte," Richard said truthfully.

"Definitely not," Alexandra agreed.

Back at the Vengeance Command Centre

"Does she have to do that?"

Olivia looked across the room to where Scarlett was looking, and she grinned. Kaitlin was completely naked and searching for her clothing after having taken a shower and then returned minus pyjamas or even a towel. Scarlett was even more put out as the door opened and an equally naked Naomi appeared.

"They're both naked!" Scarlett complained.

"So, what - they're girls," Olivia replied as she pulled off her own pyjamas and she shrugged at Scarlett despite standing there just as naked as the younger girls.

Scarlett scowled as Olivia headed off for the bathroom. However, Scarlett's shock was not fully over as Diana suddenly yelled out.

"What the hell!?"

Scarlett turned to see yet another naked girl, only the girl had scars all over her body. Scarlett's jaw dropped as she followed the scars.

"What happened to you?" Scarlett demanded as Electra groaned.

"Electra is an example of what happens when things go wrong, and you find yourself outclassed," Harper commented as she sat up, rubbing her eyes with her right hand. "Scarlett, Diana - go check out Electra while she's got nothing on."

"I hate this!" Electra growled as Scarlett hesitated. "Look, Scarlett, I am not standing here in my birthday suit all day for you two to study my body."

Scarlett grinned with embarrassment as Harper nudged her closer to the naked girl. Diana followed, cringing as her eyes followed the vicious-looking scars which spread across the naked girl's body.

"I was what they called a *Yellow* - a worthless piece of meat. They threw me into a contest as a wildcard to make life harder for another girl - a *Predator*. I was out of my depth and the other girl had to defend me as well as herself. I got slashed and stabbed - then I was patched up with duct tape."

"Duct tape?" Scarlett queried.

"Without it, I would be dead - sometimes you have to make do with what you have."

"What's that?" Diana asked, her finger touching a scar on Electra's left side.

"I was struck by two bullets, about two months ago," Electra explained.

"Electra put herself between those bullets and somebody important," Kaitlin explained.

Scarlett and Diana had both gone very pale.

"Thank you, Electra - you can put some clothes on now," Harper said before turning back to the pale girls. "Electra doesn't like people examining her scars, but I think it was important for you to see that not everything goes according to plan as a vigilante and that people get hurt."

"Thanks, I think," Scarlett mumbled, and Diana nodded.

Lasswade Road

Jeremy had awoken thinking it had all been a dream.

It had been so vivid. He had come home from school to find his mother waiting for him - but that was impossible, his mother - Kensi Lai - was in a hospital enduring treatment for some depressingly-common life-sucking cancer. He had not been to visit her in months - the last visit had been so painful for the boy that his father had refused to take his son back for another visit. Jeremy missed his mother like nothing else, as his father missed his wife of almost twenty years. Jeremy and his father had supported each other through the trauma, but then Jeremy had been distracted by his descent into *Vengeance* and their time on the run, battling their way around the United Kingdom.

The boy had been mesmerised by her voice which was instantly recognisable as the voice which had been there since the very day he was born into the world and which had been there whenever he had needed comfort or help as he had grown up. Then she had been there, sitting on the sofa, the scent of jasmine in the air. Then she had spoken to him.

"Hello, Jeremy. How's my boy?"

He had already burst into tears and they just kept falling as the boy walked up to the woman who was seated on the sofa.

"Mummy."

He had collapsed onto the sofa beside his mother and they had hugged for what had seemed like hours.

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Jeremy had got out of bed that morning, as usual, made use of the bathroom, and then dressed, before he had headed downstairs to the kitchen.

"Morning, sweetheart."

Jeremy's jaw dropped, and he felt himself tearing up again. It had been no dream - his mother was right there.

"I woke up thinking that it was all a dream," the boy admitted forlornly.

"I'm here, Jeremy. As I mentioned last night, I am fragile, but I am good for a while longer. I am so pleased to see you growing up and your father has told me all about what you've been getting up to - Harrier, indeed!"

Jeremy grinned sheepishly.

Vengeance Command Centre

After breakfast, while Kaitlin, Naomi, and Electra demonstrated to Scarlett and Diana how depraved a *Predator* could be, Harper went to lie down.

Her excuse was that Kaitlin's snoring had kept her awake - however, Blake insisted on checking her over. Keira was also aware that something was very wrong.

"Harper, you little bitch, if you fucking die on me, I will fucking kill you!" Keira growled at her sister.

"Kind of redundant, Keira . . . and not really helping," Blake pointed out as he moved the stethoscope around Harper's chest. "You, young lady, have been pushing yourself. I know you think that you have to be this hard girl who can take a beating but then continue like nothing has happened - but you don't . . . and to be brutally honest, you can't. Your body is young - that is the only reason that you have been able to survive your ordeal. Your body was able to tolerate the abuse because it was still growing, and your skin is still very flexible, and it heals quickly. However, The past few days have been emotional for you and while you had no choice but to go to town on Mary and the girls last night, you have overexerted yourself."

Harper nodded.

"It's not easy - I want to be able to run around and be a dickhead, like my friends, and sometimes I forget that I've still got a lot of healing ahead of me. I was stupid. I'm sorry Keira and I'm sorry Blake for putting you out."

"Just promise me that you'll try to take care and rest when you can, okay?" Keira asked and the look of care and love on Keira's face almost had Harper in tears.

Harper hated crying and she figured that she was beyond that, but she had been doing it a lot lately without even knowing why.

"We're here to help you, Harper," Blake reminded the girl who would be ten-years-old in three months' time. "If you want to make double-figures, young lady, you had better take care of yourself."

Blake finished his check up and Harper went off to dress.

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Keira and Blake were talking when Harper re-joined them.

Harper had a distinct feeling that the conversation involved her. Indeed, as she approached, the two adults both turned to her and they grinned - that was not a good sign!

"I didn't do it and I wasn't within a hundred miles of whatever happened," Harper offered defensively.

"She always feels guilt," Keira chuckled. "That girl is devious as hell - and guilty as hell, too!"

"Harper - do you fancy a bite of lunch, just the two of us?" Blake asked the nine-year-old.

Harper responded instantly.

"Yes, please."

Heading west

Blake headed away from Edinburgh, west along the M8. Harper sat beside him in his Jaguar XF.

"So, how are your fingers, Harper?" he asked conversationally.

Harper winced at the mention of her the fingers on her left hand. The splints had been recently removed, just the previous day, and apart from some small plasters on the fingertips, the fingers were reasonably healed. Only, they hurt. They were frozen in the position in which they had been splinted. Harper had tried to move them, but the pain had been far too much and she had refused. Blake had not forced it, allowing Harper to move her fingers in her own time.

"Painful."

Blake could see the look on Harper's face as she looked down at her left hand which rested carefully on her left thigh.

"You need to start moving them, Harper," Blake said sternly.

"But they hurt."

"That's because they haven't moved in something like two months. You need to start flexing them, exercising the joints. If you don't you may as well speak to Kaitlin and see if she can chop your hand off and we'll get you a prosthetic like Scarlett's."

Harper felt tears on her cheeks and she felt embarrassed. She hated anybody talking down to her. She hated anybody raising their voice towards her. She hated anybody telling her what to do. But she knew that everybody who was angry with her, was angry because they loved her and cared for her. She tolerated Blake for some reason, and she realised that he really did care for her. Neither spoke much as they drive for another twenty minutes before Blake pulled into a McDonalds on the outskirts of Falkirk.

Once they were inside, Blake stood before the electronic touch-screen display.

"What do you fancy, Harper?"

"Quarter Pounder with Cheese . . . large fries . . . and a large Irn-Bru. Can I have a McFlurry, please?"

"Yes," Blake chuckled as he entered the order into the touch-screen display. "Flavour?"

"Dairy Milk."

Blake doubled the order and paid, selecting table service and they went to sit down at a table beside the window overlooking the carpark.

"You want to talk about my sister, right?"

Blake grinned over at the youngster sitting across from him and he nodded.

"Do you love her?"

"Yes, I do."

They both paused as their order arrived at their table. Harper unwrapped her paper-covered plastic straw and she rammed it through the plastic lid of her drink before taking a long pull of the cold orange liquid.

"You want to marry her?"

"Yes, that would be something I would like. But, I want to know that you are happy with that, first."

"You obviously care about my sister and for some reason she loves having you around - she goes all girly and giggly, too."

Harper pretended to put her finger down her throat and Blake laughed.

"I care about your sister - and you - very much," Blake conceded.

"What about the other issue - the one with no legs?"

"Ah! The intrepid Diana Price."

Harper laughed.

"Give me your thoughts on her - you've spent many weeks in her company," Blake said.

"Initially, I thought she as the most annoying person on the planet - I still do, to be honest. I have her to thank for pulling me out of my depression and getting me talking with Scarlett. Sometimes, I think that part of her brain was in the legs she lost."

Harper paused to take a bite out of her Quarter Pounder with Cheese and to cram some fries into her capacious mouth. She swallowed the lot and carried on talking.

"For some reason I enjoy having her around and I feel that I can trust her with anything I have to say. There are some things which I don't feel I can talk to Keira about, but Diana will sit for ages and just listen to me before giving me a hug. Sometimes, I just want to slap her, but I find that I can't because I care for the dopey bitch."

Blake smiled at Harper as the youngster began to attack her burger like a starved tiger. Blake knew that the girl needed many extra calories to build up her body and help with the healing. The youngster had lost a lot of weight which was being steadily replaced by eating plenty.

"Diana has been through a lot. In the space of one afternoon, she lost her mother, and her big sister - not to mention her legs. Somehow, she moves from day to day without showing any hint of what she has been through. What I am about to tell you is between you and me; do not tell anybody else, please."

Harper nodded.

"Diana has never asked about her mother, or her sister. She was told of their death, somewhere during the first few weeks and it barely registered on the girl. She might have a father out there, but the Police could find no trace, and Diana knew nothing of her father. She was an orphan, alone in the world. She spent an entire month getting really angry at the drop of a hat, but then

you came along, Harper. Somehow, you calmed her down and the tantrums went out the window. What your sister did for Diana when she went to that home - that was amazing. Keira's a little unsure of your feelings on Diana - you went ballistic when you found out, I heard."

"I was surprised, was all," Harper replied. "I love my sister very much and I stand by any of her decisions. I owe Keira everything for taking me in and putting up with my behaviour. I know I never made it easy for her. I have no problem with Diana living with us. I'm assuming that Diana will be your daughter when you get married and my niece?"

"That's correct, Harper. But you can see her as just another big sister, if you want."

"Will I be able to see you as my Dad?"

"Only, if you want to, and I would be honoured."

"Just keep the icky stuff behind closed doors, right?"

Vengeance Command Centre

Not surprisingly, the three *Predators* were all covered in mud from head to toe.

Scarlett, covered in a similar amount of mud was lying on the cold, muddy ground with Kaitlin lying beside her.

"Why was Naomi getting sliced and diced the other day?" Scarlett asked.

"Wish I could tell you," Kaitlin whispered back. "Stay quiet - we're supposed to be ambushing Olivia and Electra.

"Sorry!" Scarlett responded as she looked out from under the wet, soggy bush.

It was not what Scarlett saw as fun, although the deeply depraved *Predators* thought that it was simply the greatest. Kaitlin had the same toughness as Harper and despite Scarlett having found out that it had been Kaitlin who had taken away her right hand, Scarlett found the youngster to be fun. Actually, all the *Predators* were fun and spending time with Kaitlin had convinced Scarlett that her father had been very wrong in his description of *Predators*. She had known it as being wrong when Harper had been her prisoner, but the mini-sleepover had confirmed everything in her mind. Her father was dead, but his legacy still existed, and that would have to be taken down, piece by piece.

Scarlett grinned as a pair of legs passed very close to her head and she nudged Kaitlin who was already up and moving as she triggered the hosepipe held in her hand and there was a pair of high-pitched screams from above them. Scarlett followed her earlier brief and she dived out, seizing hold of Olivia whose face was dripping with freezing cold water and momentarily distracted. Scarlett remembered her skills and she easily put the similarly-sized girl down into the mud. Kaitlin was attacking Electra who was a good few inches taller than the younger girl and the fight was turning into something which did not look playful. Olivia was a good fighter, too, Scarlett noticed as the other girl struggled to get out of the mud and into a position from where she could attack Scarlett. Olivia surprised Scarlett by executing a swift roll, putting Scarlett into the mud which was cold and oozing.

"No, you don't!" Scarlett growled as she flipped Olivia over her head and back into the oozing mud.

Olivia screamed during her unexpected flight through the air and she landed with a laugh and began giggling. Scarlett also laughed as she crouched in the

mud. The two girls watched as Kaitlin and Electra went to town on one another before Naomi appeared with Jessica and Diana. Naomi groaned as she made to put an end to the fight before either girl got hurt but Electra was too good, and Kaitlin soon found herself on the ground.

"Not one solitary word!" Kaitlin growled.

Jessica stifled a laugh as she gazed down at the young girl who lay in a rather undignified position with her bottom stuck up in the air, her face in the mud. Naomi, though, had no such thoughts of stifling her own laugh and she laughed out loud.

"You are so going to pay, cousin!" Kaitlin called out.

"You got your fucking arse handed to you by a goddamn *Yellow*? Fucking useless!"

Kaitlin rolled onto her back before sitting up and staring at Harper who just stood there shaking her head as she ran her eyes over all the muddy kids before settling on Scarlett.

"What do you have about muddy puddles, Scarlett?" Harper enquired with a grin.